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Permutation groups of some special degrees

A preliminary report on some joint work with P.M. Neumann

by Jan Saxl

In an impressive series of papers some fifteen years ago Noboru Ito considered transitive permutation groups of degree $p = 2q+1$, where p and q are prime numbers and $p > 11$, and proved that such groups are either soluble (and therefore well known) or very nearly 4-transitive. In this paper we want to use this remarkable result and a theorem of R. Brauer to obtain an extension to groups of degree kp with $k > 1$.

Throughout G will be a primitive permutation group on a set Ω, where $|\Omega| = n = kp = k(2q+1)$ with p and q prime numbers, $p > 11$ and $k > 1$. Let P be a Sylow p-subgroup of G. Our first result brings q into play.

Proposition 1. If $k < 10$ and $k \neq 8$ then either q divides the order of $N(P)$ or $PSL(2,n-1) \leqslant G \leqslant P\Gamma L(2,n-1)$.

Once we know that q does divide the order of G we can start the work on the proof of our main result.

Theorem. If $k = 2$ then G is 7-transitive.

If $k = 3$ then G is 10-transitive.

If $k = 4$ then either G is A_n, S_n or $PSL(2,n-1) \leqslant G \leqslant P\Gamma L(2,n-1)$.

Let $\Gamma_1,\dots,\Gamma_k$ be the P-orbits on Ω, and let H be the setwise stabilizer of each of these. The main step in the proof is to show that if $k \leqslant 4$ then H is insoluble. Then we know by Ito's theorem that H is 3-transitive (and in fact nearly 4-transitive) on each of the Γ_i, which enables us to obtain very high transitivity of G on Ω. It should be possible to deduce then that

G is alternating or symmetric, however we have not been able to do this yet when k is 2 or 3. The case $k = 4$ is easier since we can find a non-trivial element in G fixing a large number of points in Ω so that an old theorem of W.A. Manning can be applied.

We obtain the following corollaries:

Corollary 1. If G is a primitive group of degree $n = 2p = 4q+2 = r+3$ where r is also a prime number then G is A_n or S_n. Similarly for

$n = 2p = 4q+2 = 5r+3$ (eg. $n = 118$),

$n = 2p = 4q+2 = r+5$ (eg, $n = 94$),

$n = 3p = 6q+3 = r+4$ (eg. $n = 141$),

etc., etc.

Corollary 2. If G is 2-transitive of degree $3p+1$ with $p = 2q+1$ then G is alternating or symmetric.

Here the group is 2-primitive by a result of M.D. Atkinson [1, Cor.C], so G is 11-transitive by the theorem. An argument similar to that in the last section in the case $n = 4p$ then shows that G contains the alternating group.

Corollary 3. If any insoluble group of degree $p = 2q+1$ contains the alternating group then this is also true of any primitive group of degree 2p and 3p. This holds for instance if $q = 2r+1$ with r prime [15] or if $p \leq 4079$ [16].

It should be noted that some of the results in this paper have been also previously obtained by Izumi Miyamoto in [13]. In particular, the case $k = 2$ of the assertion in Section 2 as well as the case $k = 2$ of Corollary 3 are due to him.

1. Some preliminaries and proof of Proposition 1

We shall assume throughout that $k < 10$. Then we can clearly suppose that P is cyclic of order p and semi-regular on Ω. Whenever convenient, we shall assume that G is a simple group; this is justified by the following

Lemma. If X is a minimal normal subgroup of G then X is simple and primitive on Ω.

Proof. Since p divides the order of X but p^2 does not, the simplicity of X is clear. Suppose that X is imprimitive. Let B be a block of maximal size, say $|B| = m$, and let Σ be the corresponding system of imprimitivity. If $p \mid m$ then P lies in the kernel of X on Σ; but X is simple, so X must act trivially on Σ, which is impossible. Thus m divides k and $|\Sigma| = \frac{k}{m}p$.

Now G is primitive on Ω, so for some g in G we have $Bg \notin \Sigma$. Then Σg is another system of imprimitivity for X. Now X acts on Σ and Σg, and by induction (cf. the Theorem) together with a theorem of Ito [9, Satz 3], the actions of X on Σ and Σg are at least 2-transitive and are similar to each other. Therefore X_B stabilizes some block in Σg, and so has an orbit on $\Omega - B$ of size at most m. On the other hand, X_B is transitive on $\Sigma - \{B\}$, so all its orbits on $\Omega - B$ have size at least $p-1$. This is a contradiction.

Proof of Proposition 1. Suppose that q does not divide $|N(P)|$. Since P is cyclic of order p and since $p = 2q+1$, it follows that $|N(P)/C(P)|$ divides 2, and in fact is equal to 2, as we see from the Burnside transfer theorem. It now follows by a theorem of Brauer [4, Theorem 9.C] that every involution in G is conjugate to one in $N(P) - C(P)$. Therefore, if an involution of G fixes u points then $u \leq k$. Moreover, since $p \equiv 3 \pmod 4$ and $G \leq A_n$, we have $n \equiv -k \pmod 4$. Hence for k equal to 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9,

the maximum possible value for u is 2, 1, 4, 3, 6, 5, 8, 7.

If $k \leq 5$ then we can use the theorems of Buekenhout and Rowlinson [5] and deduce that G is PSL(2,n-1). If $|C(P)|$ is even then an involution in C(P) must be fixed-point-free on Ω, since if it fixed a point then it would fix pointwise the whole P-orbit containing that point. Hence such an involution is an odd permutation unless k is divisible by 4. Thus for $k \not\equiv 0 \pmod 4$ the order of C(P) is odd, so that there is only one conjugacy class of involutions in G, and another theorem of Rowlinson [17] applies.

This implies that k = 8 and the proposition is proved. It is perhaps worth observing that since a Sylow 2-subgroup S of G is semi-regular on the set of ordered (k+1)-subsets of Ω, the order of S divides $kp\cdot(kp-1)\cdots(kp-k)$. When k = 2 this implies that $|S|$ divides 8, while for k = 8 the Sylow 2-subgroups of G have order at most 2^{11}.

Some more notation. Let Q be a Sylow q-subgroup of N(P); then $Q \leq H$, where H is the setwise stabilizer of all the P-orbits Γ_i. We shall assume that Q is in fact a Sylow q-subgroup of G, because otherwise G is known to satisfy the conclusion of the theorem. Let Δ_0 be the set of fixed points of Q. We shall denote the k points of Δ_0 by $\alpha, \beta, \ldots$ Let Θ be the set of all Q-orbits, and let $\Theta_0 = \Theta - \Delta_0$. Let $\Theta_0 = \{\Delta_1, \ldots, \Delta_{2k}\}$, where $\Gamma_1 = \{\alpha\} \cup \Delta_1 \cup \Delta_2$, $\Gamma_2 = \{\beta\} \cup \Delta_3 \cup \Delta_4$, etc. Finally, let K, L be the kernel of the action of N(Q) on Δ_0, Θ_0, respectively.

2. The insolubility of H

Assume, to obtain a contradiction, that H is soluble. Then $H \leq N(P)$, and since it fixes every P-orbit, H is metacyclic of order pq or 2pq. Let $X = N(Q)/Q$ and $Y = C(Q)/Q$. Then X/Y is a cyclic group, which is non-trivial by the Burnside transfer theorem. Note also that 3 does not divide the order of X/Y, since $q \equiv 2 \pmod 3$.

Let $g \in N(Q)$ and assume that g is trivial on Θ. Then $g \in H$, so that $g \in N(P)$, and since g fixes all the Δ_i, we have $g \in Q$. Thus X is faithful in its action on Θ, so that $X \leq S_k \times S_{2k}$. It is this observation which is the key to our proof of the insolubility of H - it restricts the structure of X to only very few possibilities. We should also remark that in fact $X \leq A_{3k}$, since $G \leq A_n$.

<u>The case k = 2.</u> Here $X \leq (Z_2 \times S_4) \cap A_6$, and so X/Y is a non-trivial cyclic 2-group.

If $|X/Y| = 2$ then by [4, Theorem 9.C] all involutions of G are conjugate to involutions in $N(Q) - C(Q)$. Hence all involutions of G fix precisely two points of Ω. But G is 2-transitive on Ω by a theorem of Wielandt [20, 31.1], so that this contradicts a theorem of Hering [8]. It is perhaps worth mentioning that since 2p is 6 modulo 8 we can also deduce that 8 is the highest possible power of 2 dividing $|G|$ and obtain a contradiction this way.

Hence X/Y is a cyclic 2-factor of $(Z_2 \times S_4) \cap A_6$ of order at least 4. The normalizer of a Sylow 3-subgroup of $Z_2 \times S_4$ is $Z_2 \times S_3$, so by the Frattini argument we see that $3 \nmid |X|$. The Sylow 2-subgroup of A_6 is D_8, which does not have Z_4 as a factor. Thus $C(Q) = Q$ and $N(Q) = Q \cdot Z_4$. But then the normalizer of Q in G_α has order 2q. If all the involutions of G_α are conjugate then they fix precisely 2 points of Ω and we obtain a contradiction as before. Hence by [4, Theorem 9C] we have $O_{q'}(G_\alpha) \neq 1$. Since Q is self-centralizing, a q-element of G acts as a fixed-point-free automorphism on $O_{q'}(G_\alpha)$. Therefore $O_{q'}(G_\alpha)$ is nilpotent by a theorem of J.G. Thompson [18]. On the other hand, G_α is transitive and hence primitive of degree 4q+1. It follows that 4q+1 is a power of a prime. Now 3 divides 4q+1, so 4q+1 is an even power of 3, say $4q+1 = 3^{2s}$. Then $4q = (3^s-1)(3^s+1)$, which is impossible. Hence if k = 2 then H is insoluble.

The case k = 3. Here $X \leq (S_3 \times S_6) \cap A_9$. If g is in the kernel L of X on Θ_0 then either g is a 2-element and therefore is not in A_9, or g is a 3-element and so lies in $Y \cap L$. But $Y \cap L = 1$, so that $L = 1$ and $X \leq S_6$.

Now X is transitive on Δ_0 by the Jordan lemma, so X^{Δ_0} is a factor of X isomorphic to Z_3 or S_3. The normalizer in S_6 of a Sylow 5-subgroup has order prime to 3, so by the Frattini argument 5 does not divide the order of X. Hence X is a $\{2,3\}$-subgroup of S_6, and X/Y is a cyclic 2-group.

Let T be a Sylow 3-subgroup of Y. Then $T \neq 1$, since we have already noticed that 3 divides $|X|$ but does not divide $|X/Y|$. Hence $|T|$ is 3 or 9. If $|T|$ is 9 let T' be a Sylow 3-subgroup of the kernel K of X on Δ_0, otherwise let T' = T. Then the normalizer of T' inside S_6 is either $S_3 \times S_3$ or $(Z_3 \text{ wr } Z_2)\cdot Z_2$, neither of which has a subgroup with a 2-factor of order greater than 2. Hence $|X/Y| = 2$ by the Frattini argument. Then, using the theorem of Brauer [4] again, all involutions in G are conjugate to those in N(Q) - C(Q), whence they fix at most five points of Ω.

If now $|C(Q)|$ is odd then G has only one class of involutions and we obtain a contradiction from [17]. Assume then that $|C(Q)|$ is even. If an involution in C(Q) fixed a Δ_i setwise then it would fix it pointwise, which is not possible since q > 5. Hence the involutions of Y are semi-regular on Θ_0. It follows that $|Y|$ is twice an odd number, and so $|X|$ is 12 or 36.

Since the order of the normalizer of T in X is even by the Frattini argument, we have $T \lhd X$, and so also $T' = T \cap K \lhd X$. Note also that the semi-regularity of the involutions of Y on Θ_0 now implies that X is transitive on Θ_0. Thus X has index 1 or 3 in $(Z_3 \text{ wr } Z_2)\cdot Z_2$. Let t be an involution in K. Since t is even on Θ, it cannot be semi-regular on Θ_0. This forces K to be of order 6 with two orbits of size 3 on Θ_0, and therefore $K = S_3$ and $X = (Z_3 \text{ wr } Z_2)\cdot Z_2$. But now an inspection of $(Z_3 \times Z_2)\cdot Z_2$ shows that K cannot be a normal subgroup of X, a contradiction.

The case k = 4. First we shall show that, quite independently of the assumption on H, there is a subdegree of G which is 3 modulo q. Suppose that there is a G_α-orbit of size aq+1. Assume first that $a \geq 3$. Using the theorem of Weiss [19] extensively we see that the only possibilities are

7q+1, q+2,

6q+1, 2q+2,

6q+1, q+1, q+1,

5q+1, 3q+2,

4q+1, 3q, q+2,

and 3q+1, 2q, 2q, q+2.

We shall consider just the third case - all the other cases can be ruled out in the same way. Let Γ be the G_α-orbit of size 6q+1, and let Δ be one of the G_α-orbits of length q+1. Let $\delta \in \Delta$. Since the greatest common divisor of q+1 and 6q+1 divides 5, the $G_{\alpha\delta}$-orbits on Γ have size a multiple of (6q+1)/5. On the other hand q divides $|G_{\alpha\delta}|$. This implies that $G_{\alpha\delta}$ is transitive on Γ, which contradicts the primitivity of G (cf. the second part of the proof of Theorem 1 in [19]). This contradiction shows that $a \leq 2$, and in fact a = 1, because 2q+1 = p. Let us consider then the case where Γ is a G_α-orbit of length q+1. Then G_α^Γ is 2-transitive, so by [6] there is a G_α-orbit Σ of size cq with $3 \leq c \leq 6$. It also follows from [6] that G_α^Γ is not 3-transitive; hence $G_\alpha^\Gamma = PSL(2,q)$. But then the action of G_α^Γ on Σ implies that $q = 11$; this possibility is easily excluded by an ad hoc argument.

Hence we have shown that no non-trivial subdegree of G is 1 modulo q. This implies that one of the subdegrees is 3 modulo q, whence N(Q) is 2-transitive on Δ_0 by Witt's lemma. Hence $C(Q)^{\Delta_0} \geq A_4$, since $3 \nmid |N(Q)/C(Q)|$.

Let us return now to the proof of the insolubility of H in the case k = 4. Assume that the kernel L of X on Θ_0 is non-trivial. Then L is transitive on Δ_0. But $L \cap Y = 1$, so L is cyclic and therefore contains an odd permutation. Hence L = 1 and $X \leq S_8$. Moreover, we see as before that 5 and 7 do not divide the order of X by the Frattini argument. So X is a $\{2,3\}$-subgroup of S_8, and X/Y is a cyclic 2-group. Let T be a Sylow 3-subgroup of Y; then $|T| \leq 9$.

Assume first that $|T| = 9$. Then $T' = K \cap T$ has order 3. If $|X/Y| \geq 4$ then the Frattini argument shows that $N_{S_8}(T')$ has a 2-factor of order at least 4. But the normalizer of a group of order 3 in S_8 is either $S_3 \times S_5$ or $Z_2 \times (Z_3 \text{ wr } Z_2)\cdot Z_2$, so that $|X/Y| = 4$ and $N_X(T')$ is a subgroup of $S_3 \times S_4$ of order divisible by 9. However there is no subgroup in S_4 of order divisible by 3 with Z_4 as a factor, since the Sylow 3-normalizer in S_4 has order 6.

So $|X/Y| = 2$. Then, as before, a Sylow 2-subgroup S of Y is semi-regular on Θ_0. Hence X has order 72 or 144. Then $|K \cap Y|$ is 3 or 6, and so T' is characteristic in the normal subgroup $K \cap Y$, so that $T' \lhd X$ and $X \leq N_{S_8}(T')$. But $N_{S_8}(T')$ has orbits on Θ_0 of size 3 and 5 or 2 and 6, whereas Y is semi-regular of order at least 4.

Hence $|T| = 3$. Suppose first that $|X/Y| \geq 4$. Then by the Frattini argument, $N_X(T)$ has Z_4 as a factor. Thus T has 5 fixed points on Θ_0. Consider an element x of order 4 in $N_X(T)$. Then x either inverts T and therefore is of type 2,1,1 on Δ_0 and of type 4,2,1,1 on Θ_0, or it centralizes T and acts as a 4-cycle on Θ. In either case x is an odd permutation, which is not possible.

Hence $|X/Y| = 2$. Then [4, 9C] implies that all involutions fix at most 8 points of Ω. Notice that since 4p is 12 modulo 16, we see that 2^{10} does not divide $|G|$, so that G is known by various recent results. But let us argue directly.

We see again that a Sylow 2-subgroup of Y is semi-regular on Θ_0, so that $|Y|$ is 12 or 24 and $|X|$ is 24 or 48. Assume first that $|X| = 24$, $|Y| = 12$. Then Y has two orbits of size 4 on Θ_0 and therefore acts as A_4 on each. If X preserves the Y-orbits then X acts as S_4 on each of these and on Δ_0. But then an odd permutation in S_4 acts as an odd permutation on each of these and hence is odd on Θ. Hence X is transitive on Θ_0. But then any 2-element of X is semi-regular on Θ_0, so that involutions in X fix at most 4 points of Θ. Hence the involutions in G fix at most 4 points of Ω and so G is known [17], which leads to a contradiction. In fact, since 4p is 12 modulo 16, we see that 64 is the highest possible power of 2 dividing $|G|$, which gives an alternative argument.

Assume now finally that $|X| = 48$ and $|Y| = 24$. Here Y is transitive on Θ_0. If $|K| = 2$ then K has 4 orbits of size 2 on Θ_0, and X/K acts as S_4 on these and on Δ_0. Hence any involution of X fixes at most 4 points of Θ, and we arrive at a contradiction as before. So $|K| = 4$, and $X/K \simeq A_4$. Now A_4 has no subgroup of index 2, so K has four orbits of size 2 on Θ_0. Hence K is $Z_2 \times Z_2$ with two involutions of type $2^2 1^4$ on Θ_0 and one of type 2^4. Since X/K has no subgroup of index 2 this forces K to be central in X, which is impossible since K is not semi-regular on Θ_0.

3. The high transitivity of G

By the theorem of Ito [10] mentioned in the introduction, the insolubility of H, which we established in Section 2, implies that H is 3-transitive on each of the Γ_i. Then we know by another theorem of Ito [9, Satz 3] that the H-actions on $\Gamma_1, \dots, \Gamma_k$ are isomorphic to each other. Our notation for the points of Ω will from now on be such that $\Gamma_1 = \{\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \dots\}$, $\Gamma_2 = \{\beta_1, \beta_2, \dots\}$, etc., with α_i, β_i etc. corresponding to each other under the action of H for each i. We shall also write α, β, etc., for α_1, β_1, etc. As before, α is chosen to be fixed by Q. Let R be a complement of Q in $H_{\alpha\Delta_1\Delta_2}$. Then any element in R other than 1 fixes precisely three points of Γ_1; one of these is α, the others will be α_2 and α_3.

We shall prove the theorem only for k = 2 and k = 4; the proof in the case k = 3 is similar. Our original proof relied on the 4-transitivity of H on each Γ_i. Unfortunately, as Professor Ito has noticed recently, there is a mistake in the last part of [10, III], which so far remains uncorrected. In the later stages of the proof we therefore have to work harder, using the following result which pushes the character theory in [10] just one step further:

<u>Lemma</u> (P.M. Neumann, unpublished). Let X be an insoluble group of degree $p = 2q+1$, with p and q prime numbers and $p > 11$. If X is not 4-transitive then the stabilizer $X_{\alpha\beta\gamma}$ of three points has two orbits on $\Omega - \{\alpha, \beta, \gamma\}$, each of size q-1. Moreover, the normalizer of a Sylow q-subgroup in X' has order $\frac{1}{2}q(q-1)$.

The case k = 2.

Step 1. G is 3-transitive.

We have already noticed that G is 2-transitive by [20, 31.1], and the action of Q implies that G is 2-primitive. Now H_α fixes β and has two 2-transitive orbits $\Gamma_1 - \{\alpha\}$ and $\Gamma_2 - \{\beta\}$. Since $p \nmid |G_\alpha|$ and G_α does not fix β, the assertion follows.

Step 2. G is 4-transitive.

From the action of H_{α_1,α_2} we see that the possibilities for the length of the $G_{\alpha_1,\beta_1,\alpha_2}$-orbits are

$$\begin{array}{ll} & 1,\ 2q-1,\ 2q-1, \\ & 2q,\ 2q-1, \\ & 1,\ 4q-2, \\ \text{or} & 4q-1. \end{array}$$

Now the second is clearly impossible, since $q \nmid |G_{\alpha_1,\beta_1,\alpha_2}|$. Consider the first and third case. Here the stabilizer of any 3 points in G fixes exactly 4 points. Hence we obtain a Steiner system S(3,4,n) on Ω. Clearly $\{\alpha_i, \beta_i, \alpha_j, \beta_j\}$ is a line for any pair i,j, and it is the unique line containing any triple in it. Hence the fourth point of the line on α_1, α_2, α_3 is not one of $\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3$, and so it is α_4 or β_4. Hence $H_{\alpha_1,\alpha_2,\alpha_3}$ fixes α_4, which contradicts the semi-regularity of R on $\Gamma_1 - \{\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \alpha_3\}$. Thus this is impossible, and so G is 4-transitive.

Step 3. G is 5-transitive.

Since $G_{\alpha_1,\alpha_2,\beta_1,\beta_2}$ contains H_{α_1,α_2}, the only alternative to this assertion is that $G_{\alpha_1,\alpha_2,\beta_1,\beta_2}$ has two orbits of size p-2, which would imply that the order of $G_{\alpha_1,\alpha_2,\beta_1}$ is odd ([20, 3.13]). This is clearly impossible.

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Step 4. G is 6-transitive.

By the Lemma at the beginning of this section, the $H_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\alpha_3}$-orbits on $\Omega - \{\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \alpha_3, \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3\}$ have length divisible by q-1. By a theorem of Nagao [14], β_3 is not fixed by $G_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\alpha_3\beta_1\beta_2}$. Baring in mind that $q \nmid |G_{\alpha_1\alpha_3\alpha_2}|$, the possibilities for the length of the $G_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\alpha_3\beta_1\beta_2}$-orbits on $\Omega - \{\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \alpha_3, \beta_1, \beta_2\}$ therefore are

$$\begin{array}{ll} & 2q-1,\ q-1,\ q-1, \\ & 2q-1,\ 2q-2, \\ & 3q-2,\ q-1, \\ \text{or} & 4q-3. \end{array}$$

In the first three cases it follows from [19] that $G_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\beta_1\beta_2}$ is imprimitive. Let B be the block containing α_3. Then B is a union of $G_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\alpha_3\beta_1\beta_2}$-orbits, and since $|B|$ divides 4q-2, we have $|B| = 2q-1$ (this already excludes the third case). Let $\Lambda = B \cup \{\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \beta_1, \beta_2\}$. Then $G_{\{\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \alpha_3, \beta_1, \beta_2\}} \leq G_\Lambda$, and $G_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\beta_1\beta_2 B}$ is transitive on B. It follows that G_Λ is 5-transitive on Λ, so that $p \mid |G_\Lambda|$. This is impossible, since $p^2 \nmid |G|$.

Step 5. G is 7-transitive.

Since $H_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\alpha_3} \leq G_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\cdots\beta_3}$, all the $G_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\cdots\beta_3}$-orbits on the rest of Ω have length divisible by q-1. Hence the possibilities are

$$\begin{array}{ll} & q-1,\ q-1,\ q-1,\ q-1, \\ & 2(q-1),\ q-1,\ q-1, \\ & 2(q-1),\ 2(q-1), \\ & 3(q-1),\ q-1, \\ \text{or} & 4(q-1). \end{array}$$

We now use a variation of an argument of M.D. Atkinson in [2, Lemma] to exclude the first three cases. Let U be a Sylow 3-subgroup of $G_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\cdots\beta_3}$, and let V be a Sylow 3-subgroup of $G_{\{\alpha_1,\alpha_2,\alpha_3\}\beta_1\beta_2\beta_3}$ containing U. Then $|V| = 3 \cdot |U|$. But V normalizes $G_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\cdots\beta_3}$ and therfore permutes its orbits. Now $G_{\{\alpha_1,\alpha_2,\alpha_3,\beta_1,\beta_2,\beta_3\}}$ acts as S_6 on $\{\alpha_1,\dots,\beta_3\}$ and there are only at most four $G_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\cdots\beta_3}$-orbits on $\Omega - \{\alpha_1,\dots,\beta_3\}$. It follows that V fixes these orbits setwise. But then, since $q-1 \equiv 1 \pmod 3$, we see that V fixes apart from β_1,β_2,β_3 also at least 1 or 2 points in each long $G_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\cdots\beta_3}$-orbit. Hence V fixes at least six points, and since G is 6-transitive, V is conjugate to a subgroup of U. This is impossible, and so the first three cases cannot occur.

Consider now the fourth case. Here H is not 4-transitive, so the Lemma at the beginning of this section implies that R has order $\frac{1}{2}(q-1)$. Moreover, R has eight regular orbits Φ_i, and

$$\Delta_1 = \{\alpha_2\} \cup \Phi_1 \cup \Phi_2,$$
$$\Delta_2 = \{\alpha_3\} \cup \Phi_3 \cup \Phi_4,$$
$$\Delta_3 = \{\beta_2\} \cup \Phi_5 \cup \Phi_6,$$
and $$\Delta_4 = \{\beta_3\} \cup \Phi_7 \cup \Phi_8.$$

Since H is not 4-transitive, the $H_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\alpha_3}$-orbits on $\Gamma_1 - \{\alpha_1,\alpha_2,\alpha_3\}$ are $\Phi_2 \cup \Phi_3$ and $\Phi_1 \cup \Phi_4$. Now the shorter $G_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\cdots\beta_3}$-orbit is also an $H_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\alpha_3}$-orbit, so we can assume that this is $\Phi_2 \cup \Phi_3$.

Let S be a complement for Q in $N_G(Q)$ which contains R. Since R has small index in S, a subgroup R_0 of small index in R is normal in S. Then R_0 fixes precisely $\alpha_2,\alpha_3,\beta_2,\beta_3$ in $\Omega - \{\alpha,\beta\}$, so that the set $\{\alpha_2,\alpha_3,\beta_2,\beta_3\}$ is S-invariant, and is permuted in precisely the same way as $\{\Delta_1,\Delta_2,\Delta_3,\Delta_4\}$. Let x be an element in S which interchanges α and β; such an element exists by the Jordan lemma. Then $x \in G_{\{\alpha_1,\alpha_2,\dots,\beta_3\}}$, and so $(\Phi_2 \cup \Phi_3)x = \Phi_2 \cup \Phi_3$, so that $\{\Delta_1,\Delta_2\}$ and $\{\Delta_3,\Delta_4\}$ are x-invariant. But x involves $(\alpha\beta)$, and so it must be odd on $\Delta_1 \cup \Delta_2 \cup \Delta_3 \cup \Delta_4$ and hence also on $\{\Delta_1,\Delta_2,\Delta_3,\Delta_4\}$. It therefore involves precisely one of $(\Delta_1\Delta_2)$ or $(\Delta_3\Delta_4)$, and so acts differently on $\Delta_1 \cup \Delta_2$ and on $\Delta_3 \cup \Delta_4$. For instance, if x involves $(\Delta_1\Delta_2)$ then it fixes nothing in $\Delta_1 \cup \Delta_2$ but fixes β_2 and β_3 in $\Delta_3 \cup \Delta_4$.

On the other hand, let X be the setwise stabilizer in G of $\Gamma_1 - \{\alpha\}$ and $\Gamma_2 - \{\beta\}$. Let $\pi \in \Gamma_1 - \{\alpha\}$. Then $H_{\alpha\pi}$ fixes a point $\sigma \in \Gamma_2 - \{\beta\}$, and is transitive on $\Gamma_1 - \{\alpha,\pi\}$ and on $\Gamma_2 - \{\beta,\sigma\}$. Since $H_{\alpha\pi}$ has index 2 in X_π, it follows that $X_\pi = X_\sigma$, so that X acts in the same way on $\Gamma_1 - \{\alpha\}$ and $\Gamma_2 - \{\beta\}$. This is a contradiction, since $x \in X$. The case k = 2 of the Theorem is now proved.

The case k = 4.

Step 1. G is 2-primitive.

We have already established in Section 2 that one subdegree is 3 modulo q. Since $H_\alpha \leq G_\alpha$, the subdegrees are sums of 3, 2q, 2q, 2q, 2q. Now 3 is not a subdegree by [20, 18.4], and the possibilities 4q+3 and 6q+3 are ruled out by [19]. Finally, any group of degree 2q+3 whose order is divisible by q contains the alternating group by [20, 13.10], which rules out the possibility 2q+3. Hence G is 2-transitive, and in fact 2-primitive, since the highest common divisor of 3 and 8 is 1.

Step 2. G is 3-transitive.

Since $H_\alpha \leq G_{\alpha\beta}$, the $G_{\alpha\beta}$-orbits have size obtained out of 1, 1, 2q, 2q, 2q, 2q. Assume first that there are two of size 1 modulo q. Since G is 2-primitive and since $p \nmid |G_{\alpha\beta}|$, the only possibility is 4q+1, 4q+1. But then $|G_{\alpha\beta}|$ is odd by [20, 3.13], which is impossible as $|H_{\alpha\beta}|$ is certainly even. Hence one of the orbits has size 2 modulo q. Notice that $\{\gamma,\delta\}$ is not an orbit by [20, 18.7]. Hence the only possibilities are

2q+2, 6q,

4q, 4q+2,

or 8q+2.

The second is clearly impossible since $4q+2 = 2p$. In the first case, let Σ be the $G_{\alpha\beta}$-orbit of length $2q+2$. Then $\gamma, \delta \in \Sigma$, and since $H_\alpha \leq G_{\alpha\beta\gamma\delta}$, we see that $G_{\alpha\beta\gamma\delta}$ is 2-transitive on $\Sigma - \{\gamma, \delta\}$. Hence $G_{\alpha\beta}$ is 4-transitive on Σ, which contradicts [6].

Step 3. G is 4-transitive.

If $G_{\alpha\beta}$ has two blocks of imprimitivity then by a theorem of Grün (cf. [7, 35.5]), G_α has a normal subgroup N of index 2 which is rank 3 on $\Omega - \{\alpha\}$ with subdegrees 1, 4q+1, 4q+1. But then $|N|$ is odd by [20, 3.13], which is impossible since N must have a 2-transitive section of degree 2p.

Suppose next that $G_{\alpha\beta}$ has 4q+1 blocks of imprimitivity. Then the stabilizer of any 3 points fixes precisely 4 points in Ω, and we obtain a Steiner system $S(3,4,n)$ on Ω. Let Λ be a line, say $\Lambda = \{\lambda_1, \lambda_2, \lambda_3, \lambda_4\}$, and assume that λ_1 and λ_2 correspond to each other under the action of H, so that $H_{\lambda_1} = H_{\lambda_2}$. If $H_{\lambda_3} = H_{\lambda_1}$ then certainly also $H_{\lambda_4} = H_{\lambda_1}$. Therefore $H_{\lambda_3} \neq H_{\lambda_1}$ implies $H_{\lambda_4} \neq H_{\lambda_1}$, and hence $H_{\lambda_3} = H_{\lambda_4}$, since $\not{H}$ fixes Λ, whereas $H_{\lambda_1\lambda_3}$ has orbits of size p-2 on the set of points of Ω not corresponding to λ_1, λ_3. Thus in either case, $H_{\lambda_1} = H_{\lambda_2}$ implies $H_{\lambda_3} = H_{\lambda_4}$. Consider now the line $\Lambda = \{\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \alpha_3, \omega\}$. Then ω is not fixed by $H_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\alpha_3}$ by the above remarks, since R is semi-regular on the set of points in Ω not corresponding to $\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \alpha_3$ under the action of H.

Hence G is 3-primitive. Now one of the non-trivial subdegrees of G is $2cq+1$ with $1 \leq c \leq 4$. Certainly $c \neq 1$ since $2q+1 = p$, and $c = 2$ and $c = 3$ are excluded by [19]. Thus G is 4-transitive.

Step 4. G is 5-transitive.

Since $H_\alpha \leq G_{\alpha\beta\gamma\delta}$, all the $G_{\alpha\beta\gamma\delta}$-orbits on $\Omega - \{\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta\}$ have length divisible by 2q. If one of these does have length 2q then the other must be 6q by

[6], since G is clearly 4-primitive. Hence the possibilities are

2q, 6q,

4q, 4q,

or 8q.

The Atkinson argument used in Step 5 of the case k = 2 excludes the second case, while an analogues argument with respect to 4 rules out the first case: Let U be a Sylow 2-subgroup of $G_{\alpha\beta\gamma\delta}$, let V be a Sylow 2-subgroup of $G_{\{\alpha,\beta,\gamma,\delta\}}$ containing U. Then $|V| = 8\cdot|U|$, since G is 4-transitive. Now V normalizes $G_{\alpha\beta\gamma\delta}$, and so preserves the two long $G_{\alpha\beta\gamma\delta}$-orbits. Since each of these has size 2 modulo 4, V has an orbit of size 2 in each. Let W be the pointwise stabilizer in V of two V-orbits of size 2; then the index of W in V is at most 4. On the other hand, W fixes at least four points of Ω, and since G is 4-transitive, this means that W is conjugate to a subgroup of U. This is a contradiction.

Step 5. G is 6-transitive.

Consider the length of the $G_{\alpha\beta\gamma\delta\alpha_2}$-orbits. These are sums of 1, 1, 1, 2q-1, 2q-1, 2q-1, 2q-1. Since 8q-1 is divisible by 3, the Atkinson argument implies that $\beta_2, \gamma_2, \delta_2$ are all in the same orbit Σ.

Assume first that $|\Sigma| = 3$. Then G acts on a Steiner system S(5,8,n). The line containing α, β, γ, and any two of $\alpha_2, \beta_2, \gamma_2, \delta_2$ is $\{\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta, \alpha_2, \beta_2, \gamma_2, \delta_2\}$. Similarly the line containing α, β, γ and two of $\alpha_3, \beta_3, \gamma_3, \delta_3$ must be $\{\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta, \alpha_3, \beta_3, \gamma_3, \delta_3\}$. Consider now the line Λ on $\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \alpha_2, \alpha_3$. Then by the above observations Λ meets $\Omega - \{\alpha, \beta, \dots, \delta_3\}$ in precisely three points $\omega_1, \omega_2, \omega_3$. Then $\{\omega_1, \omega_2, \omega_3\}$ must be a $G_{\{\alpha,\beta,\dots,\delta_3\}}$-invariant subset of $\Omega - \{\alpha, \beta, \dots, \delta_3\}$. This is contrary to our knowledge of the action of $H_{\alpha\alpha_2\alpha_3}$.

Let $|\Sigma| = 2q+2$. Then $G_{\alpha\beta\dots\delta_2}$ is transitive, and in fact primitive,

$\Sigma - \{\beta_2,\gamma_2,\delta_2\}$, because it contains $H_{\alpha_1\alpha_2}$. It follows by [20, 13.2] that $G_{\alpha_1\beta_1\gamma_1\delta_1\alpha_2}$ is 4-transitive on Σ, which is impossible since q does not divide its order.

Suppose now finally that $|\Sigma| = 4q+1$. Then $H_{\alpha_1\alpha_2}$ has two ~~primitive~~ primitive orbits Σ_1, Σ_2 on $\Sigma - \{\beta_2,\gamma_2,\delta_2\}$ of size 2q-1. Since q ~~and p~~ does ~~do~~ not divide $|G_{\alpha_1\beta_1\gamma_1\delta_1\alpha_2}|$ we see that $G_{\alpha_1\beta_1\gamma_1\delta_1\alpha_2}$ is imprimitive on Σ and $\{\beta_2,\gamma_2,\delta_2\}$ is a block of imprimitivity. Consider any other block B of size 3. Then one of $B \cap \Sigma_1$, $B \cap \Sigma_2$ is a non-trivial block of $H_{\alpha_1\alpha_2}$ on Σ_1 or Σ_2, contradicting its primitivity there.

Step 6. G is 7-transitive.

The $G_{\alpha_1\beta_1\gamma_1\delta_1\alpha_2\beta_2}$-orbits have sizes obtained out of 1, 1, 2q-1, 2q-1, 2q-1, 2q-1. Now the Atkinson argument with respect to 4 (cf. Step 4) shows that all the $G_{\{\alpha_1,\beta_1,\dots,\beta_2\}}$-orbits have even length and in fact only one has length not divisible by 4. Since none is divisible by p or q, the only possibilities are 2 and 8q-4 or 8q-2.

In the first case $G_{\{\alpha_1,\beta_1,\dots,\alpha_2\}}$ has blocks of imprimitivity on $\Omega - \{\alpha_1,\beta_1,\dots,\alpha_2\}$ of size 3, and $\{\beta_2,\gamma_2,\delta_2\}$ is one of these. Now the block containing α_3 must contain 3 points out of $\{\alpha_3,\beta_3,\gamma_3,\delta_3\}$, as we see from the action of $H_{\alpha_1\alpha_2\alpha_3}$. But this must be also true of the blocks containing β_3,γ_3 and δ_3, which gives a contradiction.

In the second case, $G_{\{\alpha_1,\dots,\beta_2\}}$ is transitive on $\Omega - \{\alpha_1,\dots,\beta_2\}$, and since $G_{\{\alpha_1,\dots,\beta_2\}}/G_{\alpha_1\dots\beta_2}$ is S_6, we see that either G is 7-transitive or $G_{\alpha_1\dots\beta_2}$ has two orbits of size 4q-1. But the latter is impossible by [20, 3.13].

Step 7. G is 8-transitive.

Consider the $G_{\alpha_1\dots\gamma_2}$-orbits. Note that $\{\delta_2\}$ is not an orbit by [14], and also that q does not divide the order of $G_{\alpha\ldots,\delta_2}$. Hence the possibilities are

$$\begin{array}{ll} & 4q-1,\ 2q-1,\ 2q-1, \\ & 4q-1,\ 4q-2, \\ & 6q-2,\ 2q-1, \\ \text{or} & 8q-3. \end{array}$$

The first two are excluded by the Atkinson argument with respect to 4. In the third case it follows from [19] that G is not primitive. This is however impossible, because the blocks would have size 2q. Hence the assertion.

Step 8. G is 9-transitive.

Here all the $G_{\alpha\ldots\delta_2}$-orbits have length divisible by 2q-1. The Atkinson argument with respect to 4 implies directly that $G_{\{\alpha,\ldots,\delta_2\}}$ is transitive on $\Omega - \{\alpha,\ldots,\delta_2\}$. Since G is 8-transitive, this shows that G is 9-homogeneous on Ω. Since $G_{\{\alpha,\ldots,\delta_2\}}/G_{\alpha\ldots\delta_2}$ is S_8, we see that either G is 9-transitive or $G_{\alpha\ldots\delta_2}$ has two orbits of size 4q-2 on $\Omega - \{\alpha,\ldots,\delta_2\}$. In the latter case it follows that if Σ is any subset of Ω of size 9 then G_Σ^Σ is A_9 (and not S_9). This implies that any involution of G fixes at most ~~seven~~ two points, which is clearly impossible.

Step 9. More on the action of N(Q) on $\mathcal{E}$.

Let $N = N_G(Q)$, and let K and L be the kernels of N on $\Delta_0, \mathcal{E}_0$ respectively. Then $L \leq K$: Otherwise $LK > K$, so $1 \neq LK/K \lhd N/K$. Now $N/K = S_4$, so $LK/K \geq V_4$. But this implies that $L \cap C(Q) \not\leq Q$, and since Q is self-centralizing on its long orbits, this is not possible.

Let $X = N/L$, $Y = LC(Q)/L$. We shall write $\bar{K}$ for K/L. Then $X \leq S_8$ and $X^{\Delta_0} = S_4$, so $X \not\leq A_8$. By [20, 15.1], any 3-element of X acts on $\mathcal{E}_0$ as a product of two 3-cycles, since we know that all the 3-elements of X lie in Y. Now the normalizer in S_8 of such a 3-element is $Z_2 \times (Z_3 \text{ wr } Z_2) \cdot Z_2$, which has an elementary abelian Sylow 2-subgroup. Hence $X/Y \leq Z_2$ by the Frattini argument. If ~~a 2-element of Y~~ an involution of $C(Q)$ fixed a point in Θ_0 then, being even, it would have degree at most 6q+2; this is not possible by a theorem of Luther [11]. Hence the 2-elements in Y are semiregular on Θ_0. Therefore $|X|$ is 24 or 48. Furthermore, if $|X| = 24$ then $X = S_4$. If X has two orbits of size 4 on Θ_0 then the permutations odd on Δ_0 are even on Θ_0 and hence are odd on Ω, and the same is true if X is transitive on Θ_0. If X has orbits of size 2 and 6 then the involutions of Y cannot all be semi-regular. Hence $|X| = 48$ and $\widetilde{K}$ is Z_2 acting semi-regularly on Θ_0. Finally, note that we may assume that K normalizes R. Then $\{\alpha_2, \beta_2, \ldots, \delta_3\}$ is K-invariant.

Step 10. Let $D = G_{\{\alpha_2, \beta_2, \ldots, \delta_3\}}$. Then D is 4-transitive on $\Omega - \{\alpha_2, \ldots, \delta_3\}$. For, from the analysis in Step 9 it follows that $D_{\{\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta\}}$ is transitive on $\Omega - \{\alpha, \beta, \ldots, \delta_3\}$. Moreover, the lengths of the D_α-orbits on $\Omega - \{\alpha_2, \beta_2, \ldots, \delta_3, \alpha\}$ are obtained out of 3, 2(q-1), 6(q-1), and in fact all the $D_{\alpha\beta\gamma\delta}$-orbits on $\Omega - \{\alpha, \beta, \ldots, \delta_3\}$ have length divisible by 2(q-1), as we see from the action of K.

Since G is 9-transitive on Ω, the Atkinson argument with respect to 9 (cf. Step 4) shows that there are at most two D_α-orbits, because $6(q-1) \equiv 6 \pmod 9$. So the possibilities are

3, 8(q-1),

2q+1, 6(q-1),

2(q-1), 6q-3,

or 8q-5.

The first case is impossible by a theorem of Bannai [3, Theorem 2]. In the second case D is primitive, contrary to [19]. In the third case, D is imprimitive by [19], so the blocks must have size 2q-1. Now 6q-3 is odd, so $D_{\delta_3\alpha}$ is still transitive on the D_α-orbit of length 6q-3. It now follows from [1, Lemma 2] that $G_{\{\alpha_2,\beta_2,\ldots,\delta_3\}}$ acts as a 2-transitive group on a Steiner system S(2,2q,8q-3), which is impossible since q does not divide its order. Hence D is 2-transitive.

Now the $D_{\alpha\beta}$-orbits have length obtained out of 2, 2(q-1), 2(q-1), 2(q-1), 2(q-1), 2(q-1). Then the Atkinson argument with respect to 3 shows that $D_{\alpha\beta}$ is transitive. Similarly, the only possibilities for the length of the $D_{\alpha\beta\mu}$-orbits are 2q-1, 6(q-1),

or 8q-7.

In the first case though $D_{\alpha\beta}$ is primitive and the suborbit of size 2q-1 is 2-transitive, and a contradiction now comes from [5, II, Theorem 3]. Hence D is 4-transitive on $\Omega - \{\alpha_2,\beta_2,\ldots,\delta_3\}$.

Conclusion. We know that the orbits of $G_{\alpha_2\beta_2\ldots\delta_3\alpha\beta\mu}$ on $\Omega - \{\alpha_2,\ldots,\delta_3,\alpha,\beta,\mu\}$ have length combined out of 1 and eight times q-1. But $G_{\alpha_2\beta_2\ldots\delta_3\alpha\beta\mu}$ is normal in $D_{\alpha\beta\mu}$, and $D_{\alpha\beta\mu}$ is transitive on $\Omega - \{\alpha_2,\beta_2,\ldots,\delta_3,\alpha,\beta,\mu\}$. Hence G is 12-transitive on Ω. But G contains a 3-element in C(Q) fixing 2q+1 points of Ω. Hence by a result of W.A. Manning [12, p.596], G is alternating or symmetric. This concludes the proof of the theorem.

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